How to Make Opportunity Equal

Race and Contributive Justice

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How to Make Opportunity Equal
For Mary
Contents

Preface

1 Who Toils? Race, Equal Opportunity, and the Division of Labor 1

2 Against Leveling the Playing Field 18

3 Against Limiting Opportunity 28

4 Egalitarianism of Opportunity and Other Egalitarianisms 44

5 Can Everyone Be Esteemed? 55

6 Opportunity for What? Defending the Constellation 66

7 Sharing Labor 75

8 Transforming Relationships 91

9 Is Inequality Necessary? 105

10 Are Some Born Smarter Than Others? 114

11 Race and Political Philosophy 127

12 Justice and Markets 138

13 Contributive Justice 148

Acknowledgments 168

References 170

Index 178
You have opened the cover and are looking at the preface. Is this book meant for you? I believe so. If you are a professor or advanced student of philosophy, it addresses you by offering a new way of understanding justice and racism. If you are a beginning student, it addresses problems you may have thought about – that some folks seem to have a better chance to succeed than others – explores the reasons why, and proposes a solution. If you are a student or general reader untrained in philosophy, it is meant for you too. I have tried to write so that anyone can read and understand the argument.

At times the argument may be difficult. After all, it is a philosophy book. But I have included stories and examples to illustrate what I am saying. You may decide to read just the parts that interest you. That’s fine with me. The argument is politically and socially radical: I believe that problems of racism and unequal opportunity cannot be solved in capitalist society. The central practical proposal is simple: we need to share labor, including the boring work most of us like to avoid, if everyone is to have an opportunity to develop all of their abilities. The central philosophical innovation is also simple: philosophers have thought that justice is about what people get; I think it is about what people are able to do, particularly how they are able to develop their abilities, give those back to society, and be respected for their contributions.

Some chapters are harder than others. I believe that chapters 4, 11, 12, and 13 are harder because they discuss details of other philosophers’ ideas. Sometimes what I write may not make sense to you. If it does not, there could be at least three reasons. First, it could be that I wrote something that makes no sense. If I had thought about it better or longer or more clearly, I would not have written it. Second, it may make sense, but I may not have explained it as fully or clearly as I should. Third, it may just be a complex idea or argument. In any case, if something does not make sense to you, mark it and move on. There should be much else in the book that you will find useful. You can
come back to it later, if you wish, to decide whether it does in fact make sense
and whether I was right.

I have tried to make this book as good as I could. But some things I wrote
are wrong or confused. If I knew which these were, I would not have written
them, but I am quite sure that in a year or two I will wish I had written some
of the book differently. I offer the ideas in the book for you to explore with me:
help me to figure out where I am right and where I am wrong. Then, on the
next try, we will do better. You may contact me at <gombergopp@earthlink.net>.

Because the book is meant for teachers and students of philosophy and because
many others may wish to investigate these questions further, it includes a “scholar-
ly apparatus,” which I will explain, in case you are unfamiliar with the one
I use. I use the name of an author and the date of publication – for example,
Rawls 1999 – as an abbreviation for a book or article. At the end there is
a list of references. There, all the authors I cite are listed alphabetically with
the date of their work and a full citation. (References that can be accessed
electronically on the World Wide Web are marked with an asterisk (*).) If I
am quoting or referring to a particular passage, I will follow the citation with
the page number – for example, Rawls 1999: 464. If it is obvious what book
or article I am referring to, I will just give the page number in parentheses.
If you are not interested in these citations, just ignore them. You can use them
later if you wish.

I hope you enjoy the book, find it useful, and can help to solve the problems
of racism and unequal opportunity.
Chapter 1

Who Toils? Race, Equal Opportunity, and the Division of Labor

A radical proposal

The book you are reading is an essay in utopian political and social philosophy. Equal opportunity is usually understood as equality of competitive opportunity to attain limited positions of advantage such as those of doctor, journalist, professor, or software engineer. Ideally, no one should have unfair advantages in the competition. Although the ideal is popular, people disagree about what constitutes an unfair advantage or disadvantage.

Usually the demand for equal opportunity opposes advantage and disadvantage associated with race and gender. We think it wrong that men should get the best jobs because they are males and that the best educational opportunities are in overwhelmingly white schools, while many black students in segregated schools are “tracked” for unemployment or low-wage jobs. (Here, the “we” is intended to represent agreement between my reader and myself, not unanimously held belief.) Gender discrimination and forms of residential and school segregation that create unequal life chances violate our ideal of equal opportunity.

Yet equal opportunity can be a conservative ideal: the more talented should prosper; incomes and wealth can be unequal. Equal opportunity is “American” egalitarianism, in contrast to “European” or socialist egalitarianism that would create equal conditions for all; this alternative is sometimes called “equality of welfare” as opposed to the individualist ideal of equal opportunity that makes each responsible for her own life.

I will argue, to the contrary, that the ideal of equal opportunity can be quite radical if equal opportunity is not competitive. Competitive equal opportunity is impossible. Non-competitive opportunity must be for goods available in unlimited supply. I propose equal opportunity to attain a constellation of goods: to develop complex abilities, to contribute those developed abilities to society, and to be esteemed for those social contributions. This constellation can be of unlimited supply only if we share both routine and complex labor. Necessary
tasks of cleaning public spaces, of producing food, clothing, shelter, and durable goods such as appliances and trains, and of providing services such as health care require contributions of routine labor. This routine labor should be shared by all capable of it. When routine labor is shared, no one’s working life need be consumed by routine labor. All have opportunity to develop complex abilities and contribute these to society provided that this labor too is shared.

Some history

The phrases “equal opportunity” and “equality of opportunity” are relatively new. The first listings of their use in the *Oxford English Dictionary* are from the late nineteenth century in an economics journal, then from the early twentieth century in discussing the demand of Fabian socialists for equality of opportunity for women. Searching the University of Illinois catalog, I found two books from the 1930s and early 1940s with the phrases “equalizing educational opportunity” and “equalization of educational opportunity” in their titles, addressing anti-black discrimination in the American South (Aly 1934; Ray 1941). After World War II, 24 states passed fair employment laws prohibiting racial discrimination in employment (Chen 2001); at the federal level the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was established by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Historically, the demand for equal opportunity opposed discrimination that narrowed opportunities for women, immigrants, and racial or religious minorities. The demand was specific, usually directed against discrimination in employment or against the effects of racially segregated or gender stereotyped education.

There was a nineteenth-century notion of America as the “land of opportunity,” expressed in Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*: a country of free-wheeling economic competition where fortunes are made and lost, aristocratic privilege is absent, and poor men can move to the frontier to build a new life (Blum 1988). This older conception represented, among other things, the opportunity of white males to “make their fortune” by exploiting African-descended slave labor on new plantations in Alabama and Mississippi – land obtained by the removal of native peoples (Oakes 1983; Takaki 1979). In the words of the historian Alexander Saxton:

By the time of Jefferson and Jackson the nation had already assumed the form of a racially exclusive democracy – democratic in the sense that it sought to provide equal opportunities for the pursuit of happiness by its white citizens through the enslavement of African Americans, extermination of Indians, and territorial expansion at the expense of Indians and Mexicans. (1990: 10)

In the 1820s and 1830s many white males gained voting rights; at the same time, many black men in the North lost voting rights. Anti-black pogroms occurred in northern cities and towns; segregation in public places increased (Takaki 1979). This “opportunity” is not equal opportunity as we now conceive it.
Already at the end of the eighteenth century something like our contemporary ideal of equal opportunity was emerging. Immanuel Kant opposed aristocratic privilege and favored a civil service where positions were based on individual merit (Kant 1798: 328–9). These ideals were popularized in the French Revolution and Napoleonic period under the slogan “careers open to talents.” This slogan rejected aristocratic privilege but countenanced other advantages and disadvantages, particularly associated with gender, that we would now reject.

Why our conception of equal opportunity changes

The meaning of the phrase “equal opportunity” changes. Two hundred years ago, egalitarians demanded an end to aristocratic privilege. From the mid-nineteenth century, educated women demanded gender equality. Other struggles opposed slavery and racism: in the nineteenth century, after the American Civil War, there was a demand for “40 acres and a mule;” later, anti-racists fought to end segregation in schools and public places and racial job exclusions (skilled construction trades were often dominated by a particular national group, making it difficult for others to enter; black workers were excluded from all these trades). Now immigrants without residency documents demand health care and education. People with disabilities demand equal access to public buildings and transportation. Gay people demand the right to marry.

The content of “equal opportunity” changes for two reasons: power and logic. At different periods, different “outsiders” assert power, making demands related to demeaned status – commoners in eighteenth-century France, women, people of African descent, undocumented immigrants, people with disabilities, gays and lesbians. Yet the legal issues raised by the disenfranchisement of women are different from those raised by segregated (de jure or de facto) schools, by denial of health care services to immigrants without residency papers, or by lack of access to buildings or buses for people in wheelchairs. Still, these issues have been raised under the phrase “equal opportunity.”

The content of “equal opportunity” also changes because of logic. Once one form of unequal treatment is recognized as unfair, it can be difficult, particularly in the face of protests by people who are left out, to explain why poor white men should have the right to vote but not women; why mastery of the relevant skills admits men to journeyman status in a trade but not women; why neighborhood of residence makes one child eligible for a school but not another child with a different racial identity. When the audience is not inclusive and no one questions exclusion, marginalization, or segregation grounded in gender or racial identity, the practices may not seem illogical. But once challenged by people struggling to leave the social margins, these practices can seem illogical.

Power and logic are connected, and power is more important. To change the composition of the audience for a discussion, an “outside” group must assert
its power. Because the audience becomes more inclusive, justifications are needed that would be unnecessary when the audience was narrower. For example, if women are not considered equal persons, no justification will seem necessary for limiting the apprenticeships to males. The issue of women in the trades will be invisible. If “she is a woman” is not a valid reason to exclude an applicant for an apprenticeship, this is likely because women have insisted on their inclusion in the audience: an assertion of power. Inclusion in the audience gives women the same rights as others. Because women have those rights, it is “illogical” to give as a reason for exclusion, “She is a woman.”

In the United States today equal opportunity is thought incompatible with explicit racial exclusion: one cannot (plausibly) claim to be an equal opportunity employer and then say, “We don’t hire black folks.” Yet once we understand how black people are deprived of opportunity, it is difficult to limit our objections to explicit racial exclusion. For example, racial identifications are prominent in housing choices: most white people are reluctant to live in neighborhoods with many black residents (most black people prefer neighborhoods about 50 percent black). This reluctance causes white people to move out when a “tipping” percentage of black people is reached. For example, 10 percent of white families may move out as soon as a single black family moves in. If these families are replaced by black families, another group of white families that would tolerate a single black family but not a neighborhood that is 10 percent black would move out. If they are replaced by black families, this may “tip” another group of white families. The process might continue until the neighborhood becomes nearly all black.1 Because people act according to this perception of race, segregation often occurs also in schools, churches, and voluntary associations. But much educational and employment opportunity depends on the characteristics of the schools we go to and the friendships we form in neighborhoods, churches, and elsewhere. Racial segregation of neighborhoods and the consequences of segregation for other opportunities put many black people at a disadvantage (Wilson 1987; Massey and Denton 1993; Cashin 2004).

Considerations such as these can make us feel confused: how do we combat unequal racial opportunity? Must we break up ghetto neighborhoods and demand complete residential integration? If so, how is this to be achieved? Alternatively, should we bus children to integrate schools? Many integrated schools are internally segregated through honors programs, advanced placement classes, and other forms of “tracking.” Should elite colleges and universities give preferences to disadvantaged minorities? Should employers give similar preferences? Many argue that intervention must begin earlier, but, despairing of integration’s promise, call for better urban black schools. Once we understand

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1 For the theory, see Schelling 1971 and 1972. For applications, see the writings of Farley and his co-authors 1978, 1993, and 2002, and National Research Council 1989. Not all neighborhoods change quickly from white to black, and this too needs explaining. See Easterly 2005 for an argument that challenges the Schelling model.
the complexities of racial disadvantage, we feel that opposing explicit racial barriers is not enough. We need other policies. But it is hard to know what these other policies should be.

“Logic” can push us further. Once we understand how racial marginalization works through residential segregation, we realize that parallel processes deprive disadvantaged white people in similar ways: young people growing up in “welfare towns” in Appalachia or suburban trailer parks often have inferior educational and employment opportunities, just as black people do. They can be socially branded and slurred. Young people may see few models of economic success and be confined to schools where demoralization prevails or, in economically mixed schools, be treated as inferior. What should the phrase “equal opportunity” imply?

Moreover, when we review the many social practices and institutions that have created disadvantages, the thought occurs: wouldn’t it be better to have equal opportunity whereby success and failure are not at all affected by disadvantaged social circumstances? This has come to be called the “level playing field” conception of equal opportunity; it acknowledges limited opportunity – some positions are more desirable than others – but seeks to eliminate the social disadvantages that make it unlikely that some will realize those opportunities. The “level playing field” conception gives a radical content to the ideal of distributing limited opportunities in a fair way.

We see, then, that, for reasons of power and of logic, it is hard to fix on a single, simple meaning of “equal opportunity.” This situation makes it possible to reinterpret equal opportunity in new ways. This book will oppose the “level playing field” conception of equal opportunity. It proposes a more radical view: a non-competitive conception of equal opportunity.

**Racism and the costs of unequal opportunity**

In the United States in 1999, life expectancy for black women was 5.2 years less than that for white women, for black men 6.8 years less than for white. At the time of writing, 1 in 20 black men is in prison, and 1 in 3 aged 20–29 is in jail or prison or on probation or parole; black men are incarcerated in state prisons at a rate 9.6 times the rate for white men. Black people report poorer health but fewer visits to doctors. The unemployment rate for black people is double that for white people; the poverty rate is two and a half times greater. While income inequalities between black and white families narrowed slightly in the 1990s, the racial gap in control of disposable wealth is huge; so is the advantage that wealth brings.²

² Most of this information is in the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, which is now on the web at <www.census.gov/compendia/statatab/>. I will sometimes use data from the *Statistical Abstract* without citing it. Discussion of wealth differences are in Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Conley 1999; and Shapiro 2004. The information about incarceration is from a Human Rights Watch report at <www.hrw.org/reports/2000/usa/Rcedrg00-01.htm>. 
These racial differences in how well people fare are largely the result of the ghettoization of black residents in the major cities of the United States; no other national, racial, or ethnic group in the United States experiences a degree of residential segregation like that experienced by black people (Massey and Denton 1993).

In the United States, and elsewhere, social inequality is organized through categories of race or allied categories. Poor health services, widespread incarceration, unemployment, and low wages – all affecting black people disproportionately – constitute racist harms; these inequalities affect longevity and quality of life. Related inequalities affect *Gastarbeiter* (workers without citizenship rights) in Germany, North Africans in France, Asians in Russia, Koreans in Japan, and minority workers from the Commonwealth in Britain.³

The words “racism” and “racist” are used with many different meanings. The idea of race is central, but “race” is not a biological concept; it is a socially defined concept that cues into a person’s appearance and ancestry (Taylor 2004). In the United States someone is said to be black if she displays enough of the stereotypically “black” features of skin color, hair color and texture, shape of lips and nose, and if at a family reunion many of her kin would also display some of those same characteristics. Racial identification works through physical appearance, unlike, for example, the distinction between Serb and Croat or Muslim and Christian.

As I will use the word, what is racist in the central sense is a *society*. A society is racist when a person’s racial identification affects her likelihood of having a good life. Thus a society is racist if some members suffer lower life expectancy, more disease and injury, greater poverty, and higher unemployment *as a consequence of* a racial identification. There is much more to racism than this. Racial identification is associated with stereotypes of racial difference; so in the United States today, many more white people than black people believe that the higher rate of black poverty comes from lack of motivation or willpower (Sigelman and Welch 1991: 53, 91).⁴ And stereotyping may be part of the causal nexus I am calling “racism.” But no particular story of prejudice, discrimination, or stereotyping is part of the *definition* of “racism” as I use the term.

When I use the word “racism,” I will, with rare exceptions, be referring to anti-black racism in the United States. This usage is a distortion, but one that

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³ The classic discussion of immigrant workers in Europe – in Castles and Kosak 1973 – is helpful to comparisons with racism in the United States but is now outdated. A study focused as much on movement of capital as on movement of labor is Sassen 1988. The development of the European Union and the collapse of the old Soviet bloc have led to more migration. More recent literature includes Calavita 2005; Geddes 2003; Kopina 2005; Lahav 2004; and Lucassen 2005. For the British case, see Solomos 2003.
⁴ In one survey, 70 percent of black people but only 40 percent of white thought that disproportionate black poverty was due mainly to discrimination, while 60 percent of whites but only 34 percent of blacks thought it was due to a lack of motivation or willpower on the part of black people. Compare to Kinder and Sanders 1996: 107, which surveys only white opinion. See also Kluegel and Smith 1986.
I can justify. From the beginnings of their exploration, Europeans noticed that the peoples they encountered differed from them in appearance. Many of the first conceptualizations of these differences were biblical. The “racial” view of difference does not emerge until the late seventeenth century, and it becomes prominent in European thought by the late eighteenth century (Smedley 1993). Ronald Takaki’s *Iron Cages* gives a greater sense of the varieties of racism in the United States in the nineteenth century, including the stereotypes of native peoples and Chinese. I focus on the case of anti-black racism in the United States for two related reasons. First, it was in the United States that racism was first woven so thoroughly into social structure. Jefferson’s *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781) is remarkable because an important founder of the new republic interprets social structure through categories of race. That interpretation is popularized and consolidated in the nineteenth century (Takaki 1979). Second, in the United States anti-black racism has always been central because the economy depends upon black labor. Black people are stigmatized and segregated far beyond any other group.

A large part of the story of racial inequality is inequality of opportunity to attain more advantaged social positions. Black students attend schools that are becoming increasingly segregated (Orfield 2001); black children are less likely to graduate from high school; black high school graduates are less likely to attend college, and those who attend are less likely to graduate.

The writings of Jonathan Kozol (1967, 1991, 2005) have documented the conditions in particular schools. I too have relevant personal experiences. I teach at a low-status, urban, public university with a student population that consists overwhelmingly of disadvantaged black students from public high schools (the six-year graduation rate for incoming freshmen is less than 20 percent). In an introductory class in philosophy of science, I ask students to measure photographic images of the sun taken throughout the year (evidence that the sun and earth are further apart during northern hemispheric summer, contrary to a common belief) and report their measurements in millimeters. Several years ago one student expressed puzzlement how to do this: she did not know how to measure with a ruler. Outside the classroom, I asked whether she had taken geometry in high school. She said she had. I asked what she had learned. She said that they spent the entire year with a substitute teacher who never taught geometry. She went to a black public high school in Chicago within three miles of my campus. Whenever I tell this story to my classes, some students report similar experiences with unqualified teachers. More general studies show that low-income students, and black students in particular, are more likely to be taught by teachers who lack proper credentials in the subject (Haycock 2000: 5).

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5 Specifically, high poverty (more than 75 percent) schools were compared with low poverty (less than 10 percent) schools, and high minority (more than 90 percent) schools with low minority (less than 10 percent) schools; in schools that were either low poverty or low minority, 13 percent of classes were taught by teachers without certification in the subject; in schools that were either high minority or high poverty, 27 percent of classes were taught by teachers lacking certification in the subject.
Students are subject to frequent suspensions, particularly since the implementation of a “zero-tolerance” policy. One student told me how this worked in the case of her 7-year-old son, then completing second grade. He had just been suspended from school for the third time. The first time occurred when he was in kindergarten: he had put cheese on his French fries in the cafeteria line when he did not have a quarter to pay for it; he was suspended for “theft.” In first grade he was suspended for talking during a fire drill. In second grade he was suspended for running in the hallway. Another student told of her brother being suspended for fighting and being told that he would not be allowed to re-enroll unless he was on Ritalin therapy. Ritalin is prescribed for students diagnosed as hyperactive, but my students report that children in Chicago public schools are not given recess. Zero-tolerance policies greatly increase the number of suspensions and expulsions; in the first six years of zero tolerance in Chicago public schools, annual expulsions increased from 14 to 737 (Civil Rights Project 2000: 3). In a survey of 12 cities throughout the United States, in every city (except one that had no black enrollment) the percentage of black students suspended or expelled exceeded the percentage of black students in the schools, in one case by more than 300 percent. The overwhelming majority of such suspensions and expulsions are for “attitude” and minor behavior issues, not for violence, weapons, or drugs (Gordon and others n.d.).

A math teacher at a different high school within three miles of my campus reports that, in an effort to raise test scores, the schools have adopted a “triage” method: she was told to concentrate her efforts on the students who are performing best; the ones who are behind in mathematics were to be written off. These anecdotes reinforce Kozol’s writing, which is also specific and anecdotal. The overall effect of overcrowded classes, demoralized, unqualified, or absent teachers, punitive disciplinary policies, efforts to raise test scores by pushing students out of school, and cultural alternatives that diminish the importance of education is that 43 percent of black girls and 61 percent of black boys do not graduate from Chicago public high schools in four years (Allensworth 2005). Those who do are often unprepared for college work and under-equipped with job skills.

In pointing out that black children have inferior educational opportunity, I do not mean that unqualified teachers and inferior segregated black education are the major causes of lower performance by poor minority students. There is evidence that better qualified teachers have a positive impact on student performance, particularly for low-income and minority students (Chicago Tribune, June 9, 2006 based on Presley and others 2006). But there is also evidence that lower performance by disadvantaged children has multiple causes not easily remedied (Rothstein 2004), and this shows, I believe, the need for more radical

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6 According to a 1999 article in The Chicago Reporter, 80 percent of Chicago public grade schools do not offer recess, especially those with large minority populations. See <www.chicagoreporter.com/1999/06-99/0699healthextra.htm>.
change. Still, the lack of certified teachers is evidence that there is insufficient effort to educate poor and minority children.

I mentioned earlier, parenthetically, that the six-year graduation rate for incoming freshmen students at my university is less than 20 percent. The most important reason, according to surveys of student dropouts, was financial. They had to earn more money, or could not afford the (relatively low) tuition, or both. Also it has seemed to me that my students are often the most “together” members of families with problems related to poverty. So when there is a difficulty that others more affluent might solve by paying for professional help (child care or counseling), family members turn to our students as reliable and sensible people. This creates an additional difficulty in completing college.

In addition to completing fewer years of schooling, at every level of educational attainment black people earn lower incomes than white (Carnoy 1994: 123). This difference combines with the difference in educational accomplishments to create inequality in access to income and wealth. Lower incomes and greater poverty, organized through and exacerbated by ghettoization, lead to shorter and worse lives.

One reader of this book responded to these points by saying that the issue is class, not race. And Dalton Conley, after showing that when family wealth (not income, but assets) is taken into account, black students did as well as white in school, wrote:

This situation only emphasizes the importance of carefully separating out the effects of class from those of race . . . differences in average levels of educational attainment between blacks and whites are not about race per se. They are about socioeconomic status. Blacks are not disadvantaged in the educational system; rather, they are disadvantaged in the resources they bring to the system. Race matters, but only indirectly – through the realm of class inequality. (Conley 1999: 80)

This language generates confusion. Analysis of variance defines static categories such as “class” and “race” separately and then looks at what effects correlate with each category. But race arose historically and is constantly recreated in decisions such as where to live. Race is a class phenomenon, but a special one. Race is class made visible and vicious. Race identifies demeaned class status with a human body that has a certain appearance. Inequality within the working class is organized through race; perception of the racialized body divides the working class. One cannot understand class in the United States (or, increasingly, anywhere else) without seeing how it is constructed through racial categories. For example, disproportionate black poverty is not just another class phenomenon. Legislation before and after World War II exempted jobs held primarily by black workers from labor protection; it created educational opportunities and housing equity for working-class white people, while black people were largely excluded. They were excluded because they were black (Katznelson

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7 See the discussion in chapter 11 below on English efforts to create a visible mark of class status.
Racial inequality is recreated daily through decisions that maintain segregated black neighborhoods and schools (Fields 1990; Cashin 2004; compare my view to that of Reed 2002a and 2002b).

This response may be unfair to Conley. His point is that, once we have accounted for how race organizes inequality within the working class, race has no additional effect on educational attainment. Therefore, it seems, race itself is not causing differences in school performance beyond the effects of poverty, which is itself affected by racial identification. However, this conclusion does not follow. The correct conclusion is that similarly poor white children do as badly. If (as I suspect) anti-black racism does affect school performance, then what explains why similarly poor white children do as badly? The answer – again a suspicion – is that something else, something like racism is isolating and stigmatizing similarly poor white children, who may be identified by the way they talk, the way they dress, where they live, or through a quasi racial category. In St Louis, when I lived there, some called poor white people of rural origin “hoosiers;” it was as derogatory a term as “nigger” and worked in a similar way. With black children, it is the racial identification of the body itself that does at least some of this work (although language style and other behaviors have an effect too).

The harms of racial inequality and unequal opportunity add urgency to the question of how to make opportunity equal. This book is not concerned just with abstract social philosophy; it is also an effort to end the harms of racism.

The social context of political philosophy

In the Introduction to his 1993 book *Political Liberalism*, John Rawls explained the historical background of liberal political philosophy. As Rawls saw it, the central problem of a modern democratic society was to find a basis for social cooperation between citizens with different religious faiths, moral beliefs and values, and philosophies. These beliefs and values are often incompatible; they cannot all be true or correct. Yet they are reasonable in the sense that reasonable people embrace them.

Given these profound differences in our “conceptions of the good,” how was it possible to find common norms to govern our shared life as citizens? Rawls emphasized that his own philosophy of justice as fairness – equal liberty and opportunity and orientation toward improving life for the least advantaged – was a political conception on which citizens with different conceptions of the good could agree. We all can endorse justice as fairness as consistent with our more comprehensive philosophies and faiths. For example, while a traditional Lutheran might believe that the Catholic Church leads people away from God, she will honor her Catholic neighbor as a fellow citizen with the same liberty of worship that she enjoys. She believes her neighbor wrong about the most important things, but, as a liberal citizen, she endorses religious liberty. She believes that her faith is compatible with this tolerance.